

# A Phenomenological Approach to the Subject of History

by

Oddvar Granly

Rudolf Steiner College, Oslo

Translated by Ted Warren

In our study of the natural sciences we observe phenomena. Our study of the humanities is different, for, as in history, the occurrences happened in the past. For example, the Norse historian Snorre was in the city of Haugesund on his journey to Norway in 1218. Modern historians have reports, documents and the remains of buildings to help reconstruct the occurrence. With this material they can create a picture of the event, which can be contemplated later. To study history we distance ourselves from the standards of today and try to experience how people in earlier ages thought. And when new discoveries come to light, we can even expand or change our interpretations!

What about the origin of events—what led to the occurrences? Halvdan Koht spoke about “motives for occurrences in history.” In the early twentieth century, a strong generation of historians at the University of Oslo were trained in Marxist historical interpretation. This influenced the material in textbooks. For example, in my high school history book, the following interpretation was given for the origin of the Viking raids: “As land in Western Norway became over-occupied, the desire to travel abroad was awakened.”

## **Historic symptomatology**

Rudolf Steiner developed a historical perspective in which the search for motivating forces is on a broader level, in which the actual occurrences are symptoms and one does not search for the active impulses within them. Let us use a comparison. If a young girl blushes, should we look for the cause in her skin or in her blood system? The cause lies on a broader level in the form of a message she received that brought a blush to her cheeks. In history one should never overlook outer or peripheral causes of events. Often there is a complex of active forces behind the event. The story of the French Revolution provides an obvious example for studying with the pupils in the eighth class just how

the causes of events may be found on different planes. The teacher can begin by presenting how in 1664 Louis XIV built his Versailles at the expense of the people of France. Year after year the palace buildings were created in Baroque style, the gardens filled with hedges, alleys, symmetric flower beds, fountains, statues, a fish pond and much more. Then paint a picture of life at the court of the Sun King who was the sovereign center of the universe of orbiting servants and royalties. He had 3000 house servants, 3500 mounted guards and 10,000 foot soldiers. His daily routine was divided into a morning celebration of mass, meetings with ministers, extravagant meals, and evenings with garden parties, fireworks, balls, theater, or concerts. Amusement was not only a right, it was a duty. The court was filled with mistresses and superficialities. Once a beautiful court lady asked an older woman for advice as to a marquis who made advances to her. The answer was: "My dear, mademoiselle, marry him....then you will be rid of him."

To finance the extravagant luxuries the king's Minister of Finance Colbert unscrupulously collected taxes from the common people, while royalty and clergymen were exempt from such annoyances. Long before Louis XIV died in 1715 the peasants of France were outraged. At his funeral march the masses cursed his dead body.

We advance to 1788. It was a terrible year. The grain harvest was a total disaster, and by autumn bread prices rose dramatically. The following winter was the hardest in memory. The rivers froze to ice; even the ocean outside of Marseille froze; frozen human bodies along the roads were a common sight. By spring the situation was desperate. People stood in long lines outside the bread stores—perhaps in vain—to get bread they could not afford. On July 14 they stormed the Bastille and the Revolution began. Excitement, great expectations—human rights, in light of the times—were sanctioned on August 26, but that was not all. Continual reforms were demanded and patience declined when they were not approved immediately. For five years the revolutionary tribunal declared war on all "enemies" of the people. They were arrested on mere suspicion and decapitated. Blood flowed and finally the revolutionary leaders Danton and Robespierre were guillotined, and Marat stabbed to death. In June 1791 a flag was flown carrying the words: "Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood." Inscribed just below were the words: "or death." These words had never before been used publicly together.

The ideals of Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood were first nurtured in closed circles. Historian Karl Heyer has tried to prove that those famous three words first appeared in Freemason Lodges in the early 1700s, and from that secret background the ideals were brought forth during a revolution. They were ideals from a spiritual sphere whose time had arrived. Mankind should

understand them. The call from on high was heard but not understood. The ideals were not placed in proper relationship. An abyss opened. The monster arose. Instead of freedom, equality and brotherhood, it was death. Heyer has also shown that none of the fashionable philosophers before the revolution placed all three ideals in the proper relationship to each other. Voltaire understood a part of freedom, but had little respect for the other two ideals. Rousseau had great knowledge of equality and brotherhood but little understanding of freedom. The legal-minded Montesquieu was most concerned with equality.

### **Causes on three levels**

After describing the events from Louis XIV through the Revolution's final phases during a couple of main lessons, the time is right to contemplate the causes of the insurrection which turned into a catastrophe. A student will quickly point out that the reason was extravagant luxuries under Louis XIV that impoverished the people. Another pupil will call to attention to how the terrible conditions in 1788 and the winter of 1789 made the people desperate. One teacher had a pupil explain a third cause: the need of humanity to realize the ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood "because," as he said, "if mankind had been as animals, they would not have let themselves be led by such ideals." Now that sounds exciting!

Here we are dealing with causes on three levels: ideals on a spiritual level and in the soul, inter-human sphere, natural causes in the physical, and wanton, wasteful behavior at court and the resultant impoverishment of the masses. A natural continuation of this study in the high school would be to work with all three ideals in relation to Steiner's concept of the Threefold Social Order. We can observe the status of society's spiritual/cultural life (education, schools, universities, research, church, art) in relation to the state and economy during the past centuries. How was the spiritual/cultural life financed? Then we can observe how business and capital became independent and, in our global economy, beyond control. What are the possibilities for civil society, for those who are not included in the state and the marketplace? These themes engage the students.

### **Impulses through the unconscious**

Throughout all historical time one can wonder about events that appear simultaneously in quite different lands but make a common impression, thus indicating that it is fruitless to search for causes of events in outer, social conditions. Rather, we are led to search for the active impulse in the supersensible sphere.

Here are a few examples. Around the year 500 B.C. strong personalities appeared simultaneously but independently of each other in different lands and

cultures: Lao Tse and Confucius in China, Buddha in India, Daniel in Israel, and Heraclites in Greece. In their spiritual orientation they prepare the way from a mystical picture consciousness to a more brain-focused, conceptual thinking.

We can also take an example from modern times. In 1966 a cultural revolution began under Mao and at the same time, student revolts broke out in one university after the other—Berkeley, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, Oslo. Professors who entered their auditoriums and began to speak were interrupted and confronted by their students. He should rather walk out on the streets and teach the people! Professor Daniel Haakonsen explained how he was constantly interrupted during his lectures in Oslo between 1968 and 1970, but when he entered the auditorium in 1972 and said, “Good morning” to his students, they wrote in their notebooks, “Good morning.” The insurrection was obviously over.

When we compare both historical periods—500 B.C. and 1966–70, you may see an important difference. In our time we have newspapers and electronic media, which rapidly inform of us of the events around the world. “They have started an insurrection in Paris, we should do the same!” But that is not why it happens, for such movements do not occur except in answer to something which moves people from within. Steiner points out in various lectures on historical symptomatology that historical processes do not play out in our daily consciousness, but in much deeper levels of soul where dreams and willpower evade our consciousness.

### **History as soul development**

The awakened part of our soul life has a number of levels. Steiner calls the first one the sentient soul. Here impressions create sensory images in which the experience is immediate without creating conscious concepts. More conscious concepts arise at the second level called the rational soul when we penetrate our sensory impressions. The third level is called the consciousness soul. Here we form concepts in our consciousness and learn to recognize ourselves as the creator of concepts. As long as an individual is developing his soul life he moves through these levels, and mankind moves through the same levels during historical processes.

Each cultural epoch’s peculiarities are outer symptoms of mankind’s inner development. People awaken to new soul levels in phases. They create new cultures that are not extensions of the previous epochs.

### **Early history**

Around 3000 B.C. the Egyptian Epoch began. Something new broke through with elementary force. Within a few decades many events had taken place: an empire was formed, Memphis became the capital, Menes became the first pharaoh, the calendar was created and hieroglyphics appeared. Soon thereafter

the monumental buildings arose: pyramids and temples with picturesque relieves, sculptures and decorated columns. This was a sentient soul culture.

### **The Greek-Latin culture**

Around 750 B.C. the Greek-Roman cultural epoch began. It was time to lay the foundation for the city of Rome. From the beginning a practical, organized ability appeared. It reached full manifestation in the Roman republic. Already at the beginning their impressive legal thinking shone forth. They were very concerned with creating clear, legal rules for human interaction. This is task of laws. The Romans strove for clear agreements, order and control. This shows that human development entered the phase of the rational soul. While the sentient soul level is nourished by multiple imagery impressions, the rational soul orients to the centered point. It wants to focus. All roads led to Rome!

The rational soul expresses itself through the great Greek philosophers. The natural philosophers reflected on natural elements. They began to “ab-stract,” to pull apart one element from the other in order to understand the multiplicity of nature. Thales was convinced that all four elements are created by water while Heraclites believed that fire is the primary element of nature. This is not evident in nature. This is thinking.

Then Socrates entered the world stage, walking among citizens of Athens, speaking with the people, awakening them to clear thought processes, something which may even be painful. Socrates became the father of conceptual analysis. His pupil, Plato, further developed philosophy in the form of dialogues in which people wrestle with thoughts. And finally, Plato’s student, Aristotle, described the laws of thinking in his logic and categories. The level of soul development at this time was double-sided and is the rational or openhearted soul. In the analytical, rational operations we find one quality of soul, while the openhearted quality is expressed in ancient art that could not be created by mere logic. This cultural epoch also includes the Middle Ages during which time philosophy was further developed by Augustine, Scotus Eriugena, Abelard and others, culminating in the cathedral-like thoughts of Thomas Aquinas. At the same time heart-felt forces were developed in church art and religious beliefs. Latin remained the language of education until the end of the Middle Ages, so we call this cultural period the Greek-Latin Epoch.

### **Modern times**

Modern history began around 1400 as the Renaissance brought renewal to Europe. It was a time of great discoveries, and God’s majesty no longer resounded from the throne in the sky. In the arts perspective drawing is developed and physical landscapes gain importance. Science pioneered experiments and

mathematics as essential resources. Everything must be counted, weighed and measured. More than ever thinking reached deep into the physical world and observation established natural principles. Technical discoveries created new conditions for mankind, in particular the printing press. The mechanical clock, the compass and gunpowder were further developed and used in war.

The human being of the Middle Ages had a dreamlike character to his daily consciousness, and in the modern times a new ability appeared—the curious removal of the threshold between the physical senses and supersensible mental pictures as Columbus noted in his diary as he reached land in the new world—he had arrived in Paradise! He made physical observations of rivers that ran together, and where salt water and fresh water met. He compared the astounding nature with the description of the Garden of Eden in the *Bible, Moses Book 1: Paradise*.

Roughly one hundred years later Galileo Galilei walked to church in Pisa and sat on one of the rear benches. Before the mass began, he observed a churchman standing on a ladder lighting a huge chandelier and noticed how the chandelier began to move. The holy mass began with God's message from heavenly heights, but all Galileo can think about is the swing of the chandelier. This observation became the basis for his law of pendulum movement. How many millions of people had seen a moving object previously but not observed the law of movement? Galileo had the ability to observe keenly that is a prerequisite for the science of physics.

### **The consciousness soul and its phases**

Steiner called the period that began at the beginning of the fourteenth century and continues today the Epoch of the Consciousness Soul. It includes many paradoxes. In his book *Theosophy*, Steiner explains that the consciousness soul is that which enlightens the soul with eternal quality. The truths with which individuals live have an eternal character. One paradoxical aspect is that thinking is directed towards the earth, not the heavens. Humanity turns away from the eternal truths and concentrates on the external, purely physical, space. The explanation is that the consciousness soul evolves during a number of phases. In order to awaken, it first unites with the material, lifeless aspects of reality. Each person must develop his own thoughts and gain the courage to believe in his own convictions. In history we notice the *individual* enters the world stage. At the beginning of the fourteenth century Jeanne d'Arc appeared; she dared to stand before the majority of church and royal power blocks. One hundred years later Martin Luther was summoned to the parliament at Worms, Germany, to retract his theses nailed on the church door in Wittenberg. Luther declared that he can neither believe in the Pope or the Church nor retract his theses, because

“it is not wise to act against mt own conscience. Here I stand, I can do nothing else.” Jan Hus, Giordano Bruno, Columbus, Magellan are also examples of the new, sovereign personalities who resisted the prevailing mind-sets. Their courage and self-confidence were not based on something they had done, but rather on something they believed they could do.

When people awaken and eventually achieve the necessary inner strength on the foundation that materialistic science has prepared, the next phase of the consciousness soul is possible: the ability to approach the spiritual as a free choice made by each individual. When people are freed from old family, nationalistic or religious connections, some choose to go for money and simplistic values while others choose to approach the metaphysical world. During the final decades of the twentieth century we observed many people searching for spiritual experiences. Some called these New Age alternatives. People experimented with paths that do not align with Western philosophical traditions.

We have a long way to go before we can realize the methods Rudolf Steiner mentions in the subtitle of his book *The Philosophy of Freedom: Some results of introspective observation following the methods of Natural Science*. Such methods will help us to retain the power of observation and the consequent attitude for the objective that we have won in our studies of Natural Science while we expand our observations towards spiritual realities.

The new spiritual reality is created on shaky foundations. The Self within the consciousness soul has nothing to rest its head upon. In recent years we have also seen many people taking steps backwards. While we speak about a new renaissance, we reawaken ideals from ancient times. The experiences of freedom in the fifteenth century were followed by authoritarian tyrants in the sixteenth century. After the celebration of the French Revolution and the search for freedom, equality and brotherhood, Napoleon turned the country into a military dictatorship. The New Age movement during the past years has actually been a return to ancient forms of consciousness: shamanism, yoga, and so forth—more accurately, Old Age.

Reviewing the events and consciousness of the twentieth century we find a mixed picture: individualism, avant-garde, the chase for modernism, protest movements and youth rebellions, but also periods with totalitarian governments that annihilated all progress. Let us compare those social movements with ones we find at the beginning of the nineteenth century when efforts were directed to communal, long-term national goals. In Norway, as in other lands, literature was part of life. Wergeland, Ibsen, and Lie were spiritual leaders with authority due to their creativity. In America artists such as Whitman and Emerson helped build a nation and a democracy.

### **The isolated cultural life**

Many of the literary high points in the twentieth century were created in a state of advanced reflection, deep analysis of the times and great psychological insight. Consider the works of novelists such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil and Hermann Broch. Thoroughly reflective analysis was also the basis for paintings, sculpture, architecture and music. Yet the great advances in the arts remained outside of mainstream; it was not the artists creating history. What created history were the technical, industrial events driven by the powers of economy, culminating in today's globalism. There is something compulsive about the technical-economic culture; an inhuman intelligence drives competition, unemployment, urban sprawl, pollution, a greater separation between rich and poor, mental illness and widespread use of pharmaceuticals. This culture is in direct contrast to the progress we see in a cultural life wherein people create novels, paintings, music with artistic skill combined with a high level of reflection, all which remains, at present, powerless in light of the compulsive commercialization of civilization.

Just as one cannot judge a biography merely from the individual's years as a teenager, so may we not judge the consciousness soul development based on just its present phase. The consciousness soul is not yet anchored in adulthood. We must accept the trials, detours and progress made today and in the coming years. Humanity can define its potential for true values when the consciousness soul is developed, but a meaningful development in the future is not guaranteed. It is a question of freedom.

History teachers are challenged to understand the deeper, developmental forces and present the historical events so pupils can view an open future filled with possibilities for their own meaningful contributions. This takes the children beyond the narrow definitions of conventional historians, be they Marxist or Darwinist in approach.

### **The Waldorf school**

The larger fields of modern society are mirrored in a smaller arena: the work of the college of teachers at every Waldorf school. Teachers consider themselves free workers in a collegial community. They work to create and maintain a free expression of the curriculum, the school organization and productive lessons. A plethora of challenges arises and many teachers revert to old ways with textbooks and politics that often undermine the progress that is always possible. When one first experience what a free culture can accomplish, it is impossible to move backwards. Ultimately the Waldorf school is an arena in which we practice living in the consciousness soul.